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CHAPTER XIII

PREHISTORIC REMAINS

AHU OR BURIAL-PLACES

Form of the Easter Island Image—Position and Number of the Ahu—Design and Construction of the Image Ahu—Reconstruction and Transformation—The Semi-pyramid Ahu—The Overthrow of the Images and Destruction of the Ahu.

In many places it is possible in the light of great monuments, to reconstruct the past. In Easter Island the past is the present, it is impossible to escape from it; the inhabitants of to-day are less real than the men who have gone; the shadows of the departed builders still possess the land. Voluntarily or involuntarily the sojourner must hold commune with those old workers; for the whole air vibrates with a vast purpose and energy which has been and is no more. What was it? Why was it? The great works are now in ruins, of many comparatively little remains; but the impression infinitely exceeded anything which had been anticipated, and every day, as the power to see increased, brought with it a greater sense of wonder and marvel. "If we were to tell people at home these things," said our Sailing-master, after being shown the prostrate images on the great burial place of Tongariki, "they would not believe us."

The present natives take little interest in the remains. The statues are to them facts of every-day life in much the same way as stones or banana-trees. "Have you no *moai*" (as they are termed) "in England?" was asked by one boy, in a tone in which surprise was slightly mingled with contempt; to ask for the history of the great works is as successful as to try to get from an old woman selling bootlaces at Westminster the story of Cromwell or of the frock-coated worthies in Parliament Square. The information given in reply to questions is generally wildly mythical, and any real knowledge crops up only indirectly.